

Workshop Prepares Communicators to Flow With Media During Crises

Risk Communicator Leads Third Kansas Training Session

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A July 20-21 workshop brought together KDHE division, bureau and program directors and outside related agencies that deal with the media to hone their media skills with public information flow and media relations during a crisis. The Kansas Bioterrorism Program sponsored the workshop conducted by Vincent T. Covello, Ph.D., from the Center For Risk Communication.

Covello, a nationally and internationally recognized trainer, researcher, consultant and expert on Risk Communications, worked with New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani and his staff prior to and during the aftermath of the collapse of the World Trade Center after terrorist attacks on 9-11. He has also assisted officials around the world on public health crises such as West Nile Virus, Mad Cow Disease and SARS.



Dr. Covello

Invited participants represented many programs and bureaus within KDHE as well public information staff from other State of Kansas agencies in addition to media communicators from Iowa and Nebraska state agencies. The two, single-day workshops involved 40 participants each day.

His primary training exercise revolved around message mapping which involves establishing no more than three key messages in response to predicted questions from the media during a crisis. His research has shown that the media usually asks three types of questions during a crisis: overarching questions, seeking an overall assessment of a crisis; informational questions, to get a more detailed picture of the crisis; and challenging questions that can sometimes be confrontational in nature.

Message maps list the three key points along with three supporting points for each key point for all anticipated questions. Participants were provided with a list of the "77 Questions Commonly Asked By Journalists During a Crisis," and sample message maps.

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Message maps were developed during the workshop for several crisis scenarios, and then participants practiced the role of spokesperson in a mock press conference and conveyed the key message to Covello who took the role of a journalist to demonstrate how preparation with key messages eases the burden of dealing with the media during a crisis and improves the information flow to the public through the media.

Covello's tenants of risk communications have become an important foundation for public information offices in their response planning. For more information on these communication principles, contact Mike Cameron (mcamero1@kdhe.state.ks.us). More information on Vincent T. Covello, Ph.D., and the Center for Risk Communication is available on the Web at www.centerforriskcommunication.org.